

VZCZCXRO2555
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHDH RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHCL #0213/01 3340943
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 300943Z NOV 09
FM AMCONSUL CASABLANCA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8560
INFO RUEHRB/AMEMBASSY RABAT 0001
RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0731
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 3912

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CASABLANCA 000213

SIPDIS
SENSITIVE

STATE FOR NEA, DRL/NESCA, NEA/PI, AND NEA/MAG
COMMERCE FOR NATHANIEL MASON

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KWMN](#) [SOCI](#) [MO](#)
SUBJECT: WOMEN'S RIGHTS ADVANCING AS ISLAMIST APPEAL WANES

REF: CASABLANCA 163

¶1. SUMMARY: On November 22, the Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues, Melanne Vermeer, met with Morocco's most prominent women policy makers, civil activists, journalists, and CEOs in Casablanca. Some of the country's leading women were highly critical of the Islamist-oriented Party of Justice and Development (PJD), and some praised Fouad El Himma's Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM) for reinvigorating the country's political scene and the national debate on women's rights in Morocco. All of the women applauded the King for breaking the logjam of conservative resistance to promote the advancement of women's rights. In a meeting earlier in the day, the MFA's point person on the Forum for the Future, Ambassador Amrani, reiterated Morocco's willingness to host the Gender Institute, an offer Ambassador Vermeer welcomed.
End Summary.

The Islamist Obstacle

¶2. (SBU) Morocco's most prominent female policy makers, civil activists, journalists, and CEOs told Ambassador Vermeer and Consul General Millard that gender discrimination did not constitute a major obstacle for women legally, but does exist in society. Most posited that the Islamist-oriented Party of Justice and Development was the biggest obstacle in the advancement of women's rights in Morocco. "The PJD has put up socio-political barriers that deter the progress of women", said Nadia Lamlili, one of CNN's African journalists of the year.

¶3. (SBU) "Unfortunately, the Islamic and secular groups are divided by religious convictions that make it nearly impossible for them to work together, weakening the drive for gender equality in Morocco," confided Bouthanya Houssaini, a Member of Parliament. Dismissing claims made by Islamist politicians that Islam is the basis for women's rights, Latifa Jbabdi, another Member of Parliament who was a leader in the struggle for Morocco's 2004 Family Code reform, critiqued deficiencies in the Family Code, specifically the provision in the law, introduced by Islamist lawmakers, which allows judges to grant exceptions to the legal age of marriage, 18. Jbabdi said the loophole has created a significant increase in underage marriage in Morocco's more conservative rural areas, with 13,000 exceptions given since the inception of the Family Code.

¶4. (SBU) Aicha Ech-Chenna, the founder of Association Solidarite Feminine (ASF), an NGO providing services in Casablanca to help unwed women with children gain the knowledge and skills necessary to ensure their own livelihoods and the recent recipient of a million-dollar grant from the Minnesota Opus Prize Foundation, told Ambassador Vermeer that she had been chastised by Islamists like those in the PJD for her work with single mothers. Aicha explained that the conservative critics accuse ASF of "promoting promiscuity" and "harboring prostitutes," motivated by a fear that ASF's actions

will open the door to more radical ideologies of the West. Demonstrating the reach of this opposition, ASF Director Hafida Elbaz told Ambassador Verveer during a visit to ASF earlier in the day that many Moroccan businesses were reluctant to advertise their collaboration with, and financial support for, ASF due to the social stigma and implications of such a partnership, although business support from international companies, such as Proctor & Gamble, has increased.

The El Himma Factor

15. (SBU) Despite the strength of these conservative viewpoints on social issues, Ambassador Verveer's interlocutors all agreed that the Islamist political appeal has dwindled in the last year. "The PJD is losing ground in Morocco's political scene," opined Asma Chaabi, the country's first-ever elected female mayor from Essaouira. Explaining this decline, the country's female leaders said former Interior Minister Fouad El Himma's new Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM) has proven an effective secular alternative to the PJD, but with an additional objective of promoting gender equity. "El Himma is someone who really listens and is attuned to the needs of Moroccan women," said Ech-Chenna. A sophisticated grassroots mobilization and carefully selected candidates propelled the PAM forward in this year's communal election, and PAM's emphasis on transparency and effective governance has poached voters who had previously supported the PJD for its reputation for honesty and competency. Bouthayna assessed that PAM's success has altered the political climate in the Parliament, and she has never been more excited to be a Parliamentarian.

CASABLANCA 00000213 002 OF 002

The Ladies' King

16. (SBU) Advances in women's rights are due not only to Morocco's home-grown women's movement, but also and perhaps more importantly to the leadership of King Mohamed VI. Using both his secular and religious authority to break the logjam of resistance from conservative and religious factions of society, the King carried the burden of the Moudawana (New Family Code) on his shoulders, said Ech-Chenna. Nevertheless, participants cautioned, the King can only move society so far. If women want to see continued advancements they will need to fight for it again and again, Jbabdi told us.

17. (SBU) While obstacles to gender equality certainly remain, Hynd Bouhia, the Harvard Ph.D. former director of the Casablanca Stock Exchange, maintained that Morocco's social renaissance is genuine. She noted that Moroccan women educated abroad are returning home to take up roles in growing Moroccan businesses. Unlike other countries in the Middle East, women face no legal requirements such as the need to obtain the husband's permission in order to travel or start a business. Gender equity issues in the workplace still exist, Bouthayna argued, but they have not prevented women from succeeding.

The Gender Institute

18. (SBU) In a separate meeting earlier in the day, Ambassador Youssef Amrani, the MFA's point person on the Forum for the Future (FfF), told Ambassador Verveer that Morocco was prepared to host the Gender Institute if the U.S. supports the role. The Gender Institute was announced by the Secretary during her recent visit to Marrakesh for the FfF, an offer Ambassador Verveer welcomed.

Comment

19. (SBU) Morocco's cumulative successes in women's rights, societal

liberalization, and political reforms, extensively documented in U.S. Mission reporting over the years, make the Kingdom an ideal host for the Gender Institute. The well-entrenched and growing social support for these reform measures, and the demonstrable commitment of Morocco's King, suggest that Morocco will continue to be a leader among Muslim majority countries in supporting full women's equality and civic participation, an example to other nations, and a long-term partner of the U.S. End Comment.

110. (SBU) Ambassador Verveer cleared this cable.

MILLARD